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Dramatic shift

Putney's law career takes back seat to her shot at show biz

You may have seen Laura Putney last May 3.

At approximately 9:55 p.m. EDT, she was lying on a street in Washington, D.C., the victim of a hit-and-run that was clearly no accident.

Laura looked done for, her body beaten and battered, her friend kneeling beside her, crying for help. Would a miracle happen? Would she somehow survive?

We'll never know. "First Monday," the CBS show about the Supreme Court on which she guest-starred as the unlucky casualty, was canceled, leaving viewers (and Laura) hanging.

Frankly, though, it looked like she needed to be transported to "ER" — STAT. More likely, as she says, "That character will just have to be on 'Six Feet Under'."

Fortunately, the real Laura is alive and well and has moved on to a more stable CBS program: "JAG." She has a recurring role this year as an attorney on the popular military/legal drama.

And what does "recurring" mean? "You get to be on more than one show," she says. Her first episode aired November 5.

She's not about to complain about typecasting, either, although in real life, she really is an attorney — with a rather impressive pedigree: Harvard Law School, Class of 1995. The "JAG" break came after the show's producer, Donald Bellisario — who also produced "First Monday" and happens to have a law degree himself — learned that he and Laura shared a similar educational background.

Officially, she is "of counsel" in Los Angeles for the firm of Kauff, McClain & McGuire, with whom she worked full time in New York before following her heart and moving to the West Coast. So while she tries to build a theatrical career by guesting on television shows, doing commercials and independent films, and studying and performing with ACME Comedy Theatre, a sketch comedy group, she has the luxury of knowing that she has something to fall back on.

She says, "Many actors struggle to make a living while pursuing their career. I'm fortunate to be able to practice law on the side. It's interesting and challenging, I like it, and it's a flexible job that will support me."

Acting has long had a grip on Laura Putney, a history major and 1992 *summa cum laude* graduate of Furman. As an undergraduate, she appeared in several



On September 1, Laura Putney took on a new role when she married attorney James Feldman.

Furman theatre productions and performed locally and regionally with Idiom Savant, a popular improvisational troupe.

When she moved on to Harvard, she says, she enjoyed "a fantastic three years in an intellectually stimulating environment." Aside from her law studies, she took classes at the American Repertory Theatre and became involved with the law student drama society, which presented parodies of student life. "I performed, wrote and directed," she says. "We had great fun."

During her final year, she produced something more serious: a 45-minute mini-documentary about the law school experience. At the time, Harvard was undergoing some public and private turmoil, which she says has since been resolved.

Putney, who received academic credit for the project, interviewed more than 20 classmates, most of whom expressed disenchantment with the school and its numbing effect on their lives. She donated the video, of which only a few copies were printed, to the school; professors and university committees watched it in an effort to understand and address the students' dissatisfaction.

Somehow, though, the *New York Times* found out about it, interviewed Putney, and wrote a story saying that no one at Harvard Law School wanted to be a lawyer. Putney,

who was preparing to start her legal career with the firm of Alston & Bird in Atlanta, Ga., was quoted as saying that, given her druthers, she'd rather act.

The story, published shortly after her graduation, set off a few shock waves. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* picked up on the Alston & Bird connection and wrote a scathing editorial about this "ungrateful" young woman who didn't really want this wonderful job with this wonderful firm. The CBS Evening News and "Good Morning America" followed up, requesting interviews and clips from the film.

Putney was actually vacationing in Italy when the turmoil began. "It was a bit of a shock to get to my hotel and find a message saying, 'Dan Rather called,'" she says.

While she was willing to talk with the media, she wouldn't let them broadcast the film, in large part because her friends hadn't consented to have their views aired publicly. Without access to the film, the networks lost interest and the furor soon died down.

"It would be interesting to go back and see how the people I interviewed feel today," Putney says. "At the time, they had no perspective on their Harvard experience. I'm sure they'd offer a different take now."

After working for a year (and continuing to study acting) in Atlanta, Putney moved to New York with Kauff, McClain & McGuire. There she fed her acting jones by taking classes and landing occasional jobs, including a reading of a play by Furman alum Randall David Cook '91. But she was working 60-hour weeks, she says, so finding time for acting was difficult.

When the itch wouldn't subside, she decided to move to Los Angeles, which she did in the summer of 2001. At first she took a sabbatical leave, but when the firm asked if she would be willing to represent its interests on a part-time basis, she couldn't say no.

For Putney, things seem to be working out just fine. And in discussing the choices she has made, she recalls the words of a Harvard professor, who told students to "invent the job you want."

She says, "He told us not to try to imagine our career path, but to dream our wildest dream. Ask yourself, 'What do you want to keep from law school?' 'What do you want to add?' Then go out and create that job."

She seems to have followed his advice to the letter.

— Jim Stewart